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Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

My movie and its title '*The Missing Picture*' was partly inspired by my search for a photograph of an execution that a Khmer Rouge guard once told me about. The missing picture, maybe it's the images of genocide that don't exist. Maybe they're lost, maybe they're buried somewhere, maybe someone hid them.[1]

John Kleinen

THE CAMBODIAN-FRENCH FILM director Rithy Panh is never too tired to explain why he made his successful Oscar-nominated odyssey of loss and torment in the period 1975-1979, when Pol Pot's reign of terror was accountable for the death of at least 1.7 million people. The movie is an unusual one in the genre; hundreds of carefully carved clay figurines tell the story of the many dead in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime as a result of medical neglect, starvation, slave-like working conditions and executions. The scenes are interspersed with propaganda materials of Democratic Kampuchea; footage that was recovered by the Vietnamese army after it toppled the regime at the end of 1978.

Realist factual footage of mass killings is very scarce. We have exactly 1 minute and 59 seconds of moving images of the executions of Jews in Eastern Europe; similar visual representation of executions of Kulaks during the Great Terror or the starvation of Chinese during Mao's Great Leap Forward is equally absent. Panh's choice to represent the trauma of the Cambodian democide by artificial means is motivated by a well-known filming technique known as 'distancing' or 'defamiliarization'. It disrupts the viewer's emotional indulgence and absorption in a taken-for-granted story, instead of a more general picture of extreme asymmetric power balance.

For Panh, the picture that was missing was a personal one that he never will get to see. "It's the one that I miss the most. It's to see my parents get older, to be able to share time with them now, to help them, to love them, to give them back what they gave me," he said to *Le Point* reporter Ono-Dit-Biot. "I would prefer to have my parents with me than to make movies about the Khmer Rouge" (*Le Point* 3-10-2013).

It is not Panh's first movie about Cambodia's national nightmare. Best known is his *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2003), followed in 2011 by *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell*. In between he made movies about the colonial past and the return of refugees to his home country, among others. With his impressive *Bophana, a Cambodian tragedy* (1997), memorializing the victims portrayed in the thousands of mugshots that the prison guards left at Tuol Sleng, he opted to show the atrocities exclusively from the victims' perspective. Separating victims from perpetrators seems to be a deliberate choice for Panh. In an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of *The Act of Killing*, he said: "Now, since (...) *S21* has been made (...) ... there are several films (...) where they bring the victims and the guardians together. But often also against each other's will. And that gives a kind of unease when you see that kind of encounter between people."[2]

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (*Jagal* or 'Execution(er)' in Indonesian) was the big surprise of 2012. Unlike Rithy Panh, Oppenheimer exclusively used the staged memory of criminal and paramilitary vigilantes who did the dirty business for the Indonesian army and the politicians who toppled President Sukarno in 1965. The *Kudeta* of 30 September 1965 brought Suharto's military junta to power. In a wave of killings lasting five months, members of the Special Forces, ad-hoc criminal gangs and religious Muslim fanatics destroyed the lives of at least, and possible more than, half a million people. Unlike the Khmer Rouge leaders, these people were never brought to justice. Instead, they continue to be feared and in a certain way respected, still enjoying the admiration of many in Indonesia. Two protagonists prominently figure in *The Act of Killing* – Anwar Kongo (72) and Adi Zulkadry (69) – who re-enact their own roles during the murderous events. Anwar was a petty thug in the mid-1960s, trafficking in movie-tickets. Adi was a leading founder of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth and a member of its elite death unit, the Frog Squad. Embarrassingly for Indonesia's democratic rulers, Anwar maintained personal relations with a local newspaper editor who played a coordinating role during the massacre. But similarly uncomfortable is the appearance in the film of the current-day politician Jusuf Kalla, who is seen congratulating members of Indonesia's youth movement, *Pemuda Pancasila,* for their share in exterminating Indonesian communism. Revealing is the applauding audience of a TV talk show that visibly enjoys Anwar stories of his killing sprees. Adi reminds the viewer of the victor's justice: "War crimes are defined by the victors. We won."

The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer's movie is for good reason. Filmmakers in Indonesia are confronted by an officially encouraged conspiracy of silence about the past; this is unlike in Cambodia where, already in 1979, the Vietnamese advisors of the Heng Samrin government tried to bring Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary to justice. This trial, often considered a 'show trial', resulted in death penalties, which for lack of defendants in custody were never actually carried out. And it took nearly two decades to successfully arrest and imprison some leaders of the Khmer Rouge, where after the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, better known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal) could finally start proceedings in 2004. Whatever one's opinion of the tribunal, at least the Cambodians have sought justice for the victims. Legal actions have been ongoing since 1979, despite disapproval from the UN, which regarded the Khmer Rouge as the official representative of Cambodia until 1993.

Above:
Still from *The Missing Picture*. Copyright ContactFilm.

Graphic details of killing

This attitude is clearly absent in Indonesia. When it comes to the search for historical truth in both countries, Cambodian efforts are evidently more successful. Movies such as those made by Rithy Panh are freely distributed, whilst it would be absolutely unthinkable for films such as *The Act of Killing* to be promoted by Indonesia as a national product to be proud of – which is exactly what happened with Panh's movie at Cannes, where it won the prestigious *Un Certain Regard* Award.

Oppenheimer's movie is, nevertheless, path-breaking in the way it brings back a nearly forgotten way of representing the acts of killing, which were not the sole responsibility of the Indonesian army, but also seemingly ordinary citizens who went on a killing rampage. This is accentuated in the movie by the hubris shown by those interviewed, and by the stories made public by the military supporters of the New Order.[3]

In Panh's movie the graphic details of the killings are portrayed by using clay figurines, whilst Oppenheimer engages over-acted re-enactments to tell the story. Where Panh reinforces his cinematic testimonial by alternating sequences from propaganda movies (shot by China-trained Khmer Rouge cameramen) with stills of the clay puppets, Oppenheimer leaves us puzzled by phantasmatic shots of a bizarre opera-buffa near Toba Lake, or by a mediated act of remorse by Anwar Congo at the scene of one of his former crimes. Both movies confront us with the phenomenon of the mass destruction of humans. In Panh's filmic strategy to unravel the Khmer Rouge's democide, one sees the panic of a regime that fell onto its own sword. This led to its demise but also to a catastrophe for its victims. Oppenheimer's movie is so disturbing because he suggests that civilian psychopaths or lunatics were mainly responsible for the act of killing.

In a recent book, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan makes a more convincing argument than Oppenheimer does.[4] The killings of hundreds of thousands of people, often randomly executed, go back in history far beyond modern times, but the organized mass killings we have seen in the last century have been possible only in societies where social compartmentalization has taken place. The killings are enabled by a deliberate cutting of social contacts between the majority and a condemned minority. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point within special compartments, which have been physically or mentally erected by the *genocidairs* acting on behalf of the rulers. But this doesn't mean that everybody becomes a killer when circumstances are 'right', De Swaan repeatedly warns. And he categorically calls into doubt Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil'. The occasion enables the act, but individuals are still able to refuse under extreme circumstances, as is shown by Panh's not Oppenheimer's movie.

Indonesia and Cambodia

In his book, De Swaan deals with a large number of genocidal regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the nearly forgotten campaign against the Maya-Ixil Indians of Guatemala under the regime of Efrain Rios Montt in 1982 and 1983. Suharto's regime started as a reign of terror driven by an organized military group and ended with a mega-pogrom. To suggest that the motives of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously underestimates the ways in which they became involved in these killings. In Cambodia, the mysterious Communist Party went on a rampage against its own population. In both cases the compartmentalization of their self-created adversaries was the motive and the orchestrated means of the killers. The Khmer Rouge's mass slaughtering did contain elements of an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the experiment is cynically voiced by the French radical philosopher Alain Badiou, who needed 35 years to apologize for his former defense of the Khmer Rouge: "Mieux vaut un désastre qu'un désêtre" ("better a disaster than a lack of being"). It explains very neatly why Rithy Panh, in his movie, avoided confronting the victims with their executioners.

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References

1 IDFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.
2 ten Brink, J. & J. Oppenheimer (eds.) 2012. *Killer Images. Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence,* London and Washington: Wallflower Press: 244. Cfr. *Deacon of Death* (movie, 2004) by Jan van den Berg (drsFILM; www.drsfilm.tv/en).
3 See: 'The Act of Killing: A CAS Roundtable', *Critical Asian Studies* 46(1), 2014. Only one of 13 contributors, Katharine McGregor, refers to the Cambodian case.
4 de Swaan, A. 2014. *Compartimenten van vernietiging. Over genocidale regimes en hun daders* [The Killing Compartments: On genocidal regimes and their perpetrator], Amsterdam: Prometheus.